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Book Review of Jerry Root's *Splendour in the Dark: C.S. Lewis's Dymor in His Life and Work*

A Literary Review of Lewis Studies

Volume 40, Number 2 Fall/Winter 2022

Review

Splendour in the Dark: C.S. Lewis's Dyer in His Life and Work. Jerry Root. InterVarsity Press, 2020, Hansen Lectureship Series, 256 pages (Paperback), 978-0-8308-5375-5.

As many Lewis scholars are aware, the young C.S. Lewis wasn't planning or expecting a career as a novelist. He had dreams of being a poet. While he continued to write poetry throughout his life, his career as a published poet was limited to two books: a collection of war poems titled *Spirits in Bondage* (1919) and the book-length epic *Dyer* (1926), both released under the name Clive Hamilton. Neither book gained commercial or critical traction, partly because the modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot and others took poetry in a different direction. Much has been written about how Lewis criticized Eliot's work (or at least literary movements that Eliot was associated with) for decades, only to befriend him in the late 1950s.

Since *Dyer* represents Lewis' last book of published poems before he became the bestselling prose writer we know today, its existence raises some compelling questions. Does it contain hints of the Lewis we remember today? The question has been difficult to answer since the book has only been intermittently in print. In 1950, it was reprinted under Lewis' real name with a new preface. After Lewis' death, Walter Hooper included it in the 1972 anthology *Narrative Poems*. Jerry Root's book *Splendour in the Dark* solves this problem, reprinting the poem and including some fascinating new

scholarly material. The first half of the book reprints the 1950 edition of *Dymer*, including the 1950 preface where Lewis reflects on how the poem, “like many better books, found some good reviews and almost no readers” in 1926 (9).

For readers not familiar, *Dymer* is an epic about a hero of the same name who rebels against the planned society he lives in, fleeing to the wilderness. Over the poem’s course, the hero Dymer travels, fathers a child with a mysterious woman, evades a dark magician, discovers his rebellious act instigated a larger revolt, and ultimately dies in a duel with his monster offspring. The poem is filled with references to everything from Freudian psychology to Wagnerian opera, which make its complex story even harder to untangle. Fortunately, *Splendour in the Dark* doesn’t just reprint the poem: it also contains annotations by David C. Downing. Downing has experience in this area: he provided the annotation for the excellent 2014 edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. As one would expect from someone with Downing’s reputation, the annotations to *Dymer* are immensely helpful. He notes editing changes between the editions, such as how “wheeling” in the 1950 edition became “wheeled” in *Narrative Poems* (11). Downing also explains literary references, from Wagnerian opera to Plato’s Republic, and unusual word choices, such as the word “furzy” (21). Downing even highlights images or themes that connect to Lewis’ life or other works—how the poem early on refers to the hero Dymer as a boy, and

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how Lewis “nearly always uses the word *boy* to suggest callowness, noisiness, a loss of simplicity and wonder” (31). Students or scholars approaching *Dymer* for the first time couldn’t ask for a better resource.

The book’s second half starts with an introduction by Hansen Lectureship founder Walter Hansen on the lectureship’s history, and his feelings on *Dymer*. Hansen’s introduction sets the stage for Jerry Roots’ three lectures on *Dymer*, originally delivered for the 2018–2019 Hansen Lectureship at Wheaton College. Each of Roots’ lectures is paired with a response from a different contributor—Jeffrey C. Davis, Mark Lewis, and Miho Nonaka.

As mentioned earlier, *Dymer* is a fascinating artifact of an alternate career that Lewis tried to take, which makes one wonder if it provides hints of Lewis’ later work. Root believes that it does. In his first lecture, Root calls *Dymer* “an important work, though often neglected” (133). He argues that “*Dymer* has, in seed, several big ideas that would come to full fruit in his mature work” (ibid). In particular, Root highlights how Lewis communicates that “reality is iconoclastic,” destroying his hero’s idols so he must progress (134). The poem also portrays a “self-referential and utilitarian” villain comparable to villains in Lewis’ later novels (149), an emphasis on the hero atoning for his sins (158), and a style indicating that Lewis had already learned to “write for the ear” (138). In his second lecture, Root traces influences on the poem—both implicit ones that

demonstrated from Lewis' life, like World War I and Nordic myth (174-182), and explicit ones that Lewis himself identified, like the poem's emphasis on escape and longing (183-197). In his third lecture, Root expands on his claim that *Dymer* contains seeds of Lewis' later work, highlighting four categories of the hero's experiences: Lewis' hero experiences iconoclastic reality, faces contemptible evil, and realizes his insufficiency, all while going on a quest for meaning (207). For Root, "each category opens a door into things to come" (ibid). For example, the poem sets the pattern for Lewisian heroes who all have their illusions bashed as they discover that they "must give way to accommodation or assimilation" (211-212). They each learn that "reality is iconoclastic; all prior notions must give way, and those who surrender to the real enjoy its fruit" (213).

Root's three lectures make an excellent case for *Dymer* being an important work in Lewis' bibliography, showing many of his trademark ideas in other formats. The three responses to Root's three lectures each hinge on a follow-up question: granting that *Dymer* is an important work, is it a great one? Is it a work of high quality? For Jeffrey C. Davis, the answer is "no." He concurs with Root that the poem is "an overlooked literary artifact by one of the most influential English writers of the twentieth century" (161). He agrees with Root that the poem shows an iconoclastic theme that Lewis explored in later works (171). However, Davis argues that based on the poem's mixed reception when it

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Appeared (164-167), its lack of coherent organization befitting an epic poem (167-169), and Lewis admitting mixed feelings about the work in his 1950 preface (170), that *Dymer* is not an exemplary work. What Davis finds more interesting is critics' mixed responses meant that Lewis had a *Dymer*-like experience. Like the hero of his poem, "he experienced iconoclastic disillusionment" (171). Lewis' iconoclastic suffering helped create the author readers know today, which Davis sees as an essentially redemptive result (*ibid*). Davis makes it clear throughout that he doesn't disagree with Root's claims about *Dymer's* importance; he only disagrees with Root about how much reverence the poem deserves. Davis' remarks provide a great case study on how to respectfully disagree with a colleague's views while emphasizing his respect for his colleague and what they hold in common.

For Mark Lewis, the answer to whether *Dymer* is a great work is "probably not, but I'd like to consider some side trails." He admits he lacks Root's expertise to assess the poem, so "my only hope, it seems, is to find my lane and stay in it" (198). Since he has been a theater actor and director for forty years, M. Lewis gives "a series of surmises about the artist's imagination" (199). He talks about Ingmar Bergman's explaining his creative process—not unlike *Dymer's* 1950 preface, where the author shows why he took one creative direction and not another (1999-2000). He mentions playwrights like Anton Chekhov and Bertolt Brecht, who conveyed their

themes to unsympathetic audiences—a reminder that audiences shouldn't critique a work too quickly (200-201). After considering whether the hero Dymmer bounded into the poem the way Aslan bounded into the first Narnia book (202), M. Lewis ends with some thoughts on Shakespeare. One of *Dymmer's* various literary references is a quote from *Midsummer Night's Dream* (203). In the play, Hippolyta talks about imagination creating interpersonal connection, how telling stories leads to "minds transfigur'd so together" (204). Perhaps, M. Lewis suggests, this is what the author of *Dymmer* hoped for—"the possibility of his own teeming imagination being greeted by the imagination of a future reader" (ibid). These surmises may seem like dithering, but they bring out an important truth: writing, like acting, is a risky undertaking. Even if one agrees with Davis that *Dymmer* is a sub-par poem, one can appreciate that its author strove to make something great.

For Miho Nonaka, the answer to whether *Dymmer* is a great work is, "no," but as a fellow poet, she is impressed that "it aims so high." She echoes M. Lewis' point about staying in one's lane (232) and describes her line as a poet who discovered C.S. Lewis' books while growing up in Japan (233-236). As a poet, Nonaka is impressed at Lewis choosing the difficult task of writing epic poetry (237) and feels his "poetic gift would have no doubt flourished if he were born a few centuries earlier" (238). Ultimately, Nonaka feels that *Dymmer* is undercut by the fact its hero is too much like its author

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(238). The more the poem becomes about the young Lewis' struggles, "the more *Dymer* ends up sounding pedantic and preachy" (239). Still, Nonaka agrees with Root that the poem contains many things that blossomed in Lewis' later work. She even identifies some new connections: *Dymer* features a hero seeking a woman whose name he never learns, and "in a way, Lewis's later works continue to ask her name" (240). In later works, that longing search becomes not a search for a woman, but *Sehnsucht* (ibid). Not only does Nonaka provide an interesting new piece of evidence for Root's argument, but her meditations on poetry highlight something that could easily be overlooked: the sheer scale of what Lewis was attempting. When epic poetry was already rare, Lewis devoted himself to writing an epic. To publish that epic poem in 1926, 11 years after Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" first appeared and pushed old forms even further into the margins, seems downright Quixotic. If nothing else, one must admire the young C.S. Lewis for never shying away from a fight.

Whether readers catch Root's passion for *Dymer* from reading this poem or agree with his three responders that the work is flawed, *Splendour in the Dark* accomplishes something crucial. The book gets *Dymer* back into print, with scholarly aids for reading it, and a group of insightful comments from writers who each take the poem seriously. Not all of these writers love the poem, but they still rise to the challenge of giving thoughtful critiques. No matter how critical, each response gives

each response gives readers something to chew on and motivation to explore the poem. *Splendour in the Dark* is an excellent resource for scholars seeking to understand Lewis' poetry, his prose, or how those two areas connect.

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Society News

Monthly meetings continue on Zoom and in-person: notification usually goes out before the third or fourth Wednesday. If you are not already on the email list, email Hope Langevin at hl.pilgrim@gmail.com and ask to be put on the list. Alternatively, you may sign up as a member on the improved website (see below).

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